

# MONSTER MAN

Paul Stevenson outlines the life and career of Ray Harryhausen, the greatest SPFX man of them all



Harryhausen poses with some of his monstrous creations from *Clash of the Titans*. A model of Calibos, who was turned into a monster by Zeus for his crimes, plus the Gorgon Medusa, whose eyes have the power to turn her beholders into stone

As most readers are aware, it was *King Kong* that fired Ray Harryhausen's interest in 3 dimensional stop-motion animation.

It was not, however, his first exposure to the work of his mentor, Willis O'Brien. At the age of five he saw *The Lost World*, but it was eight years later

that *King Kong* would start him on the path that would become his life's work.

Born on June 29th, 1920, in Los



Angeles, California, Ray Harryhausen developed an interest in sculpting and palaeontology at an early age and *King Kong* showed him a way of bringing his sculptures to life. Harryhausen began designing and building his own dinosaurs — with the help of his parents — and bought a second-hand 16mm camera, intending to work on a large project called *Evolution* which he promptly abandoned when Walt Disney released *Fantasia*. However, he continued sculpting and experimenting with his camera, and in 1938 he visited Willis O'Brien to show him samples of his work. O'Brien welcomed the young man and offered some helpful criticisms. (In years to come, Harryhausen would continue to show him samples of his work, which would eventually lead to his first real animating job.)

### THE RIGHT DIRECTION

In 1940, he took along his films and models to George Pal, who gave him a job on his famous Puppets. Although it wasn't what he really wanted to do, he took the job anyway, since it was a step in the right direction. He spent two years there and then did a three year stint in the Army Signal Corp, returning home to begin work on a series of short animated films (*Humpty Dumpty*, *Mother Hubbard*, *Miss Muffet* and *Mother Goose*) in the hope of selling them to schools. After having no luck, Harryhausen packaged them using a *Mother Goose* prologue and epilogue and released it as a ten-minute reel, *Mother Goose Stories*, which eventually found a distributor.

O'Brien gave him his first real break in 1946 by hiring him as an assistant on a film he was planning to make, *Mr Joseph Young of Africa*, (released in 1949 as *Mighty Joe Young*). Due to the complexity of some of the effects involved, Harryhausen did about 85 per cent of the actual animation, while O'Brien spent his time planning out most of the shots, only managing to do a few scenes himself.

### TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

The film proved to be a tongue-in-cheek variation of *Kong*. This time, a twelve-foot gorilla is captured and brought home where it breaks free and runs amuck before being returned to his jungle home. Despite some impressive animation, including a sequence of Joe being roped by cowboys on horseback, the film was a box-office failure, although it did earn O'Brien a well-deserved Oscar for special effects.

Harryhausen joined O'Brien in trying to get another story idea off the ground — *Valley of the Mist*. Unable to obtain financing, the project fell by the wayside and Harryhausen returned to his animated fairy tales in order to make a living. He made *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Rapunzel*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *King Midas*. During this

time, Harryhausen also tried launching a film version of the H. G. Wells novel *War of the Worlds*, intending to use the stop-motion process to animate the Martian tripods as they stalked across the countryside of Victorian England. A few years later, George Pal would make his version, updating the film to present-day (1950s) California.

### LOW BUDGET

Producer Jack Dietz made Harryhausen the effects supervisor in his first solo feature *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), based on *The Fog Horn* by Ray Bradbury, an old friend of Harryhausen's. A low budget monster-on-the-loose film, it was the first of a series of films featuring creatures awakened or affected by radioactivity and going on the rampage. The lack of money forced Harryhausen to rethink some of his techniques and was the first time that he tried incorporating animated creatures into real backgrounds — through a photographic process — rather than build expensive miniatures. Despite the budget, the film did very well.

As a result, Harryhausen tried selling two ideas to Dietz. One was *The Elementals*, which Dietz bought but couldn't get underway. The other was *The Giant Ymir*. It was while waiting for news on *The Elementals* that Harryhausen was introduced to the man with whom he would form a suc-

cessful partnership; producer Charles H. Schneer.

### GIANT OCTOPUS

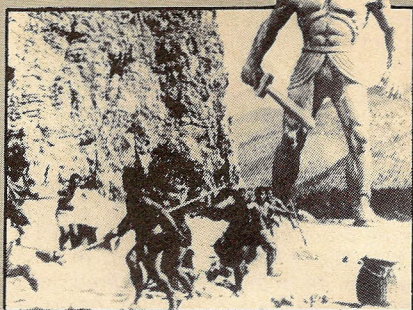
Schneer wanted to make another monster-on-the-loose film and needed someone who could work on a low budget feature. The result was *It Came From Beneath The Sea* (1955), a film about a giant octopus. (It was cheaper to make and required less time to animate.) Despite being a rehash of *The Beast*, the film did well and the two men decide to do another film together.

Cashing in on the current UFO craze, they made *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers* (1956). Another low budget film, it was their last for Columbia Pictures and they parted for a short while. Harryhausen rejoined Willis O'Brien for Irwin Allen's *The Animal World*. They did a brief piece of dinosaur footage that was considered to be the best part of the film and the subsequent publicity campaign for the film was built around it. After completing the animation, Harryhausen assisted Viewmaster in the production of some 3D slides. At the same time, Charles Schneer had gone independent and formed his own company, Morningside Productions, and Harryhausen rejoined him to start work on other projects.

Some of Harryhausen's finest moments came in the otherwise pretty rough film, *One Million Years BC*. Here we see stone age hunters trying to catch a Diplodocus for breakfast







The animated statue of Talos from *Jason and the Argonauts*.

## BEST-KNOWN

Their first independent feature was the 1957 film *Twenty Million Miles To Earth*, featuring one of Harryhausen's best-known creations — The Ymir. A spaceship arrives back from Venus, crashing in the process. A canister is recovered containing a gelatinous-like egg from which hatches the Ymir, a reptilian-like creature that rapidly grows to enormous proportions. Angered by its treatment, it breaks loose, fights with an elephant, and is finally killed on top of the Colosseum. (In the film, Harryhausen also put in a brief appearance at the zoo. A missing extra resulted in him running on with a bag of peanuts to feed the elephant, just before the Ymir breaks free and fights with it.)

A sketch showing a man battling a living skeleton on top of a spiral staircase was the starting point for the next Schnee/Harryhausen production and their first Dynamation film in colour. (Although *The Animal World* was made in colour, it was strictly tabletop animation, with no live action in the same scene.)

Harryhausen, intrigued with the skeleton idea, began looking for a way to use it and started reading Arabian Nights stories. That idea, and others, finally took shape in their first fantasy film *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1959). The film was a resounding success, featuring many exotic creations by Harryhausen. The Cyclops, a Dragon, a two-headed Roc, a Snake Woman and, of course, Sinbad's duel with the living skeleton. After making the film, Harryhausen moved to Britain in order to take advantage of a special effects process called Sodium Backing that was only available here.

For their next project they adapted Johnathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* into *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* (1960). Apart from his stop-motion work, the film also allowed Harryhausen to refine some of his optical techniques.

## THUNDERSTORM

*Mysterious Island* (1961) was their next film. Based on the novel by Jules

Verne, the film concerns a number of American Civil War prisoners escaping in a balloon during a thunderstorm. They eventually end up on an uncharted island infested with all types of exotic life. A giant crab, giant bees, an octopus and a Phororhacos, a prehistoric bird that most people took to be a giant chicken. The giant creatures were created by courtesy of Captain Nemo, who has been developing them as an alternative food source. From his disabled *Nautilus* he helps the castaways refloat a pirate ship and get away before a volcanic eruption destroys him and his submarine.

The next film is one of Harryhausen's favourites and it is easy to see why. Amongst its elements are; a massive statue of Talos that comes to life, the gruesome Harpies, a battle with the seven-headed Hydra and the famous fight with the army of skeletons that were grown from the teeth of the dead Hydra. The film was *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), and it became the most successful Dynamation feature so far.

Another story idea that Harryhausen had been nurturing for years, finally came to fruition in the shape of *First Men in the Moon* (1964), based on the novel by H. G. Wells. It had always been a favourite of Harryhausen's, who had repeatedly tried to get it into production, but Schnee was always unwilling to film it. A screenplay by Nigel Kneale finally convinced Schnee and production went ahead. The storyline was watered down and played mainly for laughs, with a modern-day prologue and epilogue tacked on.

An eccentric professor invents an anti-gravity material (Cavorite) that enables him to fly to the moon in a spherical spaceship built in his greenhouse. Along with him goes Arnold Bedford and his fiancée Kate. On the moon they encounter the Selenites and unfortunately wipe them out with the cold germs that they brought from Earth with them.

This was Harryhausen's only Anamorphic feature film (different screen ratio) and it presented him with some problems, forcing him to rethink and redesign a lot of his techniques. Despite this, he achieved some memorable effects; the massive Selenite solar collector, the Selenites themselves and the killing of the mooncalf.

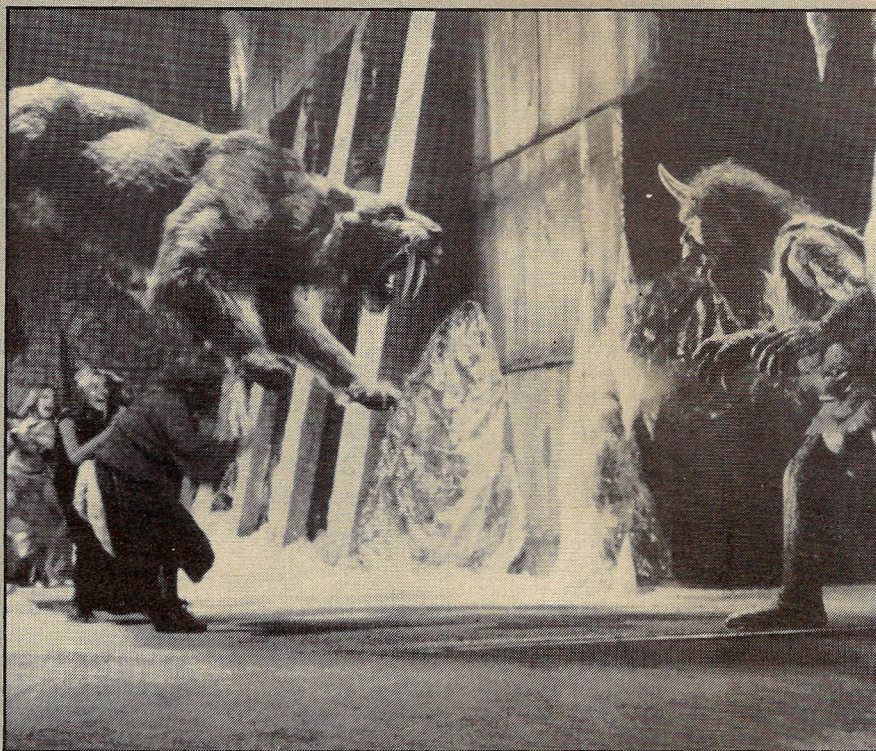
## HAMMER

Harryhausen then did some work for Hammer films in their prehistoric epic *One Million Years B.C.* (1966). He created many prehistoric reptiles, including, Pterodactyl, Archelonischyros, Ceratosaurus, Triceratops and an Allosaurus. Many consider Harryhausen's work to be the best part of the film, (although some may prefer the sight of Raquel Welch in her fur bikini!).

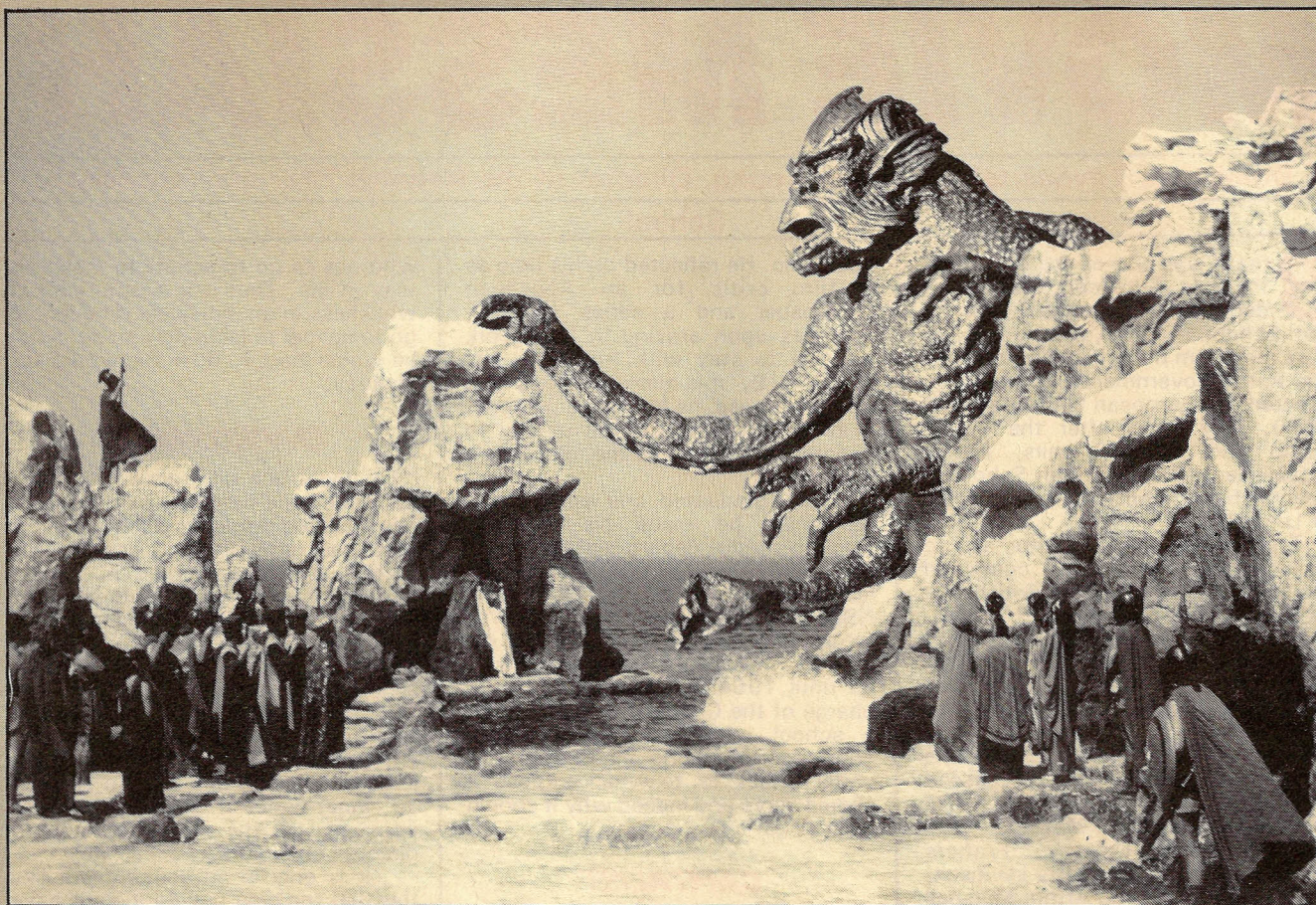
Back in 1942, Willis O'Brien had carried out extensive preproduction work on a film project called *Gwangi*. Another *Lost World* film, it featured a miniature horse, a Pterodactyl and a fight between an Allosaurus and an elephant. The film was dropped before shooting began.

Twenty-seven years later saw the release of *Valley of the Gwangi*. As a

Teeth vs horns in a typical Harryhausen scene.







One of the Titans of the title of *Clash of the Titans*. The Kraken is a sea monster, normally kept in prison by the sea-god Poseidon, who has been summoned to make a snack of Andromeda (Judi Bowker)

tribute to his mentor, Harryhausen utilised many of the storyboarded sequences that O'Brien had prepared all those years ago. Like *Twenty Million Miles to Earth*, the film's climax featured a battle with an elephant, this time replacing the Ymir with an Allosaurus. Despite this, and some other well done scenes — especially the sequence involving the lasooing of the Allosaurus by a group of cowboys — the film did not do well at the box-office, a failure that Harryhausen blames on poor promotion and distribution, and also the prevalent trends in the cinema at the time.

### HAVOC

Harryhausen and Schneer returned to Sinbad for their next film *Sinbad's Golden Voyage* (1973), which proved to be a big hit and their most successful film since *Jason*. Harryhausen's work featured the siren figurehead on Sinbad's boat that is brought to life and causes havoc, Koura's spying Homunculus, the fight between the Griffin and the Cyclopean Centaur, the fountain of destiny and, perhaps the best known sequence of all, the fight against Kali, the six-armed goddess.

With this success in mind, both men remained with Sinbad for their next film *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1977). Unfortunately, the film did not do so well, despite some well-

done scenes (the ghouls attacking Sinbad in the tent, a sabre-tooth tiger, a 'minoton' and a very well done baboon and Troglodyte).

Harryhausen and Schneer returned to Greek mythology for the first time since *Jason*. For *Clash of the Titans* (1981), Harryhausen created Pegasus, the winged horse; The Kraken, a large sea monster; Dioskilos, the two-headed dog that guards Medusa's lair; Medusa herself; giant scorpions; a giant vulture; and Calibos, (who was an interesting mixture of live-action and animation. This was necessary as the script required Calibos to speak).

### RELATIONSHIP

This was the first film not distributed by Columbia Pictures, whom Schneer and Harryhausen has built up an enduring relationship with ever since the formation of Morningside Productions. Escalating film costs forced Columbia to back out and MGM stepped in, picking up the sixteen million dollar bill, a substantial part of which went to pay the actors involved, including Laurence Olivier, Flora Robson, Sian Phillips, Claire Bloom, Ursula Andress, Maggie Smith and Burgess Meredith.

This film was also a change for Harryhausen, who had never before hired another animator to work with him. He hired Jim Danforth, who did the bulk of the Pegasus shots and the

Dioskilos sequence. He also hired Steve Archer, who did bits of various shots and concentrated on Bubo, the robotic owl. Harryhausen spent his time working on other shots, including the memorable sequence of Medusa in her lair, being stalked by Perseus.

### NEXT PROJECT

It looks as though Schneer and Harryhausen will be staying with Greek Mythology for their next project *Force of the Trojans*, which may be finished by the time you read this. *Force of the Trojans* also marks a change of policy for Harryhausen, who had always been resistant to the new technologies available to the stop-motion animator. For this film, Harryhausen will be supervising the effects that will be created at George Lucas' ILM facility in San Rafael, California. Effects that will utilise ILM's computerised 'go-motion' system — a set-up first used on *Dragonslayer*.

It looks as though Harryhausen's army of fans will be in for a treat from the 'Father of Dynarama' later this year. It will be interesting to see what the master of stop-motion manages to create with this new technology and, if the screenplay reflects the quality of his work, then perhaps we may finally have the quintessential Harryhausen film. ■